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# CANADA'S CHANGING POPULATION DISTRIBUTION



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1981 Census of Canada

# CANADA'S CHANGING POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

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# *INTRODUCTION*

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There's no doubt about it. Canada's population continues to shift as the results of the latest census are analyzed and added to the saga which began way back in 1666, when Jean Talon, the Great Intendant of New France took the first modern census and counted some 3,215 persons in the area we know today as the province of Quebec. Canada is the second largest country in the world with a land area of some 9,203,000 hectares, yet it ranks 28th with a population approaching 25 million at the time of the 1981 Census. But how has this all come about? This report will attempt to describe the phenomenon of population change in Canada. It's a fascinating story, so let's just look at what has happened to the Canadian population since the 1871 Census, the first one taken after Confederation in 1867.



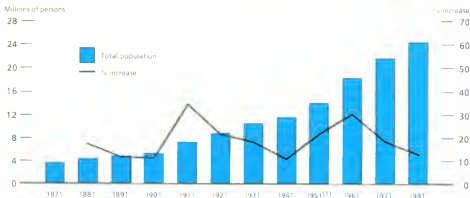
# POPULATION GROWTH IN CANADA

In 1871, Canada, or the land area as we know it today (except for Newfoundland), had a population of 3,689,257. It increased by over 635,000 or 17.2% in the following 10 years and has continued to increase every decade to 24,343,181 persons counted at the last census taken in 1981. The increase in population from census to census has varied from a low of 10.9% between 1931 and 1941 to peak growth rates of 34.2% and 30.2% between 1901 and 1911, and between 1951 and 1961 respectively. The world-wide Depression

of the 1930s, the opening up of vast fertile land area in Canada's West, the great baby boom of the post-World War II period and high immigration levels from Europe, were events that were mainly responsible for these decades of record change.

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## Population Growth in Canada, 1871-1981



(1) Includes Newfoundland for the first time.

Source: George, M. V., 1976, *Population Growth in Canada*, Catalogue No. 99-701.  
1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-901, Table 1.

Table 1

## History of Population Growth in Canada, 1871 to 1981

	Population	Increase	% increase
1871	3,689,257		
1881	4,324,810	635,553	17.2
1891	4,833,239	508,429	11.8
1901	5,371,315	538,076	11.1
1911	7,206,643	1,835,328	34.2
1921	8,787,949	1,581,306	21.9
1931	10,376,786	1,588,837	18.1
1941	11,506,655	1,129,869	10.9
1951(1)	14,009,429	2,502,774	21.8
1961	18,238,247	4,228,818	30.2
1971	21,568,311	3,330,064	18.3
1981	24,343,181	2,774,870	12.9

(1) Includes Newfoundland for the first time.

Source: George, M. V., 1976, *Population Growth in Canada*, Catalogue No. 99-701.  
1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-901, Table 1.



# REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION SINCE THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Since Confederation, Canada has seen development proceed from east to west, and population shifts have naturally accompanied that development. At the turn of the century, the Atlantic provinces' population was 894,000 or 16.6% of Canada. In 1981, it increased to 2,234,000 persons but its proportion of Canada's total population dwindled to 9.2%. Quebec in 1901 counted 1,648,900 people or 30.7% of Canada's total. Eighty years later it numbered 6,438,400 but its share dropped off to 26.4%. Ontario experienced a similar situation with 2,182,900 population and 40.6% of Canada's total in 1901, rising to 8,625,100 in 1981 but dropping to 35.4% of the nation's total. It is in the Prairies

that the most dramatic changes have taken place. In 1901, this region accounted for 7.8% of the total population of the country and rose to a peak of 22.3% in 1921, dropping back to 21% in 1941 and 17.4% in both 1961 and 1981. British Columbia is the only region to show a continuous increase in the share of Canada's population, going from 3.3% in 1901 to 11.3% in 1981.

Table 2

Percentage Distribution by Region of Population in Canada, 1901-1981

	1901	1921	1941	1961	1971	1976	1981
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Atlantic provinces	16.6(1)	11.4(1)	9.8(1)	10.4	9.5	9.5	9.2
Quebec	30.7	26.9	29.0	28.8	27.9	27.1	26.4
Ontario	40.6	33.4	32.9	34.2	35.7	35.9	35.4
Prairie provinces	7.8	22.3	21.0	17.4	16.4	16.4	17.4
British Columbia	3.3	6.0	7.1	8.9	10.1	10.7	11.3
Canada(2)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

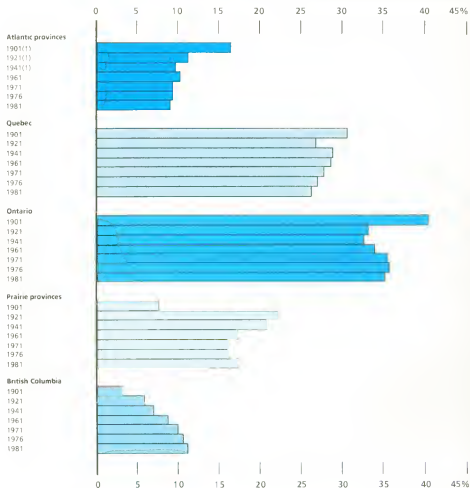
(1) Excludes Newfoundland.

(2) Includes Yukon and Northwest Territories.

Source: 1981 Census of Canada and earlier censuses.

Chart 2

Percentage Distribution by Region of Population in Canada, 1901-1981



(1) Excludes Newfoundland

Source: 1981 Census of Canada and earlier censuses

# WHAT'S HAPPENED IN THE PAST DECADE?

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The populations of the Atlantic provinces and of Quebec have continued to decline as a proportion of the whole while Ontario continued its rise in Canada's share, peaking at 35.9% in 1976, then dropping off to 35.4% in 1981. The Prairies' share of population stabilized at 16.4% in 1971 and 1976, but jumped to 17.4% in 1981. But British Columbia continued its rise from 10.1% in 1971 to 10.7% in 1976 to 11.3% in 1981. Why has this taken place? Major reasons for the Atlantic provinces' decline were the more favourable economic climate and employment opportunities elsewhere in Canada and, therefore, a substantial loss of population due to migration. In Quebec, the drastic change in natural increase was bound to have a significant effect. Ontario's proportionate loss came in the last half of the decade and was due no doubt to the boom economy occurring primarily in Alberta. The Prairies' share while increasing from 16.4% in 1971 to 17.4% in 1981 was being subjected to two opposing forces - a significant loss of rural farm population and a very strong increase due to energy-related employment opportunities. British Columbia's moderate climate is probably a major factor in that province's attraction for migrants, but its highly developed resource and service industries have contributed significantly as well.

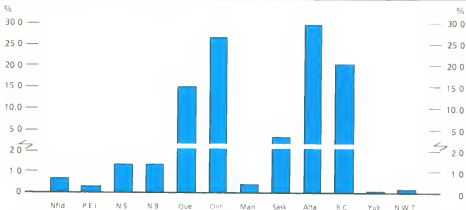


## AND WHAT ABOUT THE PAST FIVE YEARS?

All provinces and territories shared in the 5.9% increase in population between 1976 and 1981, but the province of Alberta recorded a tremendous increase of 21.8%, far outdistancing any other. In fact, Alberta accounted for 29.6% of the increase in Canada's population in this five-year period, Ontario for 26.7%, British Columbia for 20.6%, Quebec for 15.1%, and the other provinces together for only 8.0%.

Chart 1

Percentage Distribution by Province and Territory of Population Increase in Canada, 1976-1981



Source: 1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-901, Table 1

Table 3

## Numerical and Percentage Distribution of Population Increase, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1976-1981

	Numerical distribution	% distribution
Canada	1,350,577	100.0
Newfoundland	9,956	0.7
Prince Edward Island	4,277	0.3
Nova Scotia	18,871	1.4
New Brunswick	19,153	1.4
Quebec	203,958	15.1
Ontario	360,642	26.7
Manitoba	4,735	0.4
Saskatchewan	46,990	3.5
Alberta	399,687	29.6
British Columbia	277,859	20.6
Yukon	1,317	0.1
Northwest Territories	3,132	0.2

Source: 1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-901, Table 1

# *POPULATION CHANGE BELOW THE PROVINCIAL LEVEL*

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British Columbia is divided into regional districts, Ontario into counties and regional municipalities, and Quebec and the Maritimes into counties. All are administrative areas for which population data are available. Other provinces have comparable areas called census divisions, but these have no administrative powers. All in all, let's call these areas census divisions and let's take a look at population shifts at this lower level between the last two censuses - 1976 and 1981:

- 210 of 266 census divisions gained in population;
- 20 of these 210 census divisions gained more than 20%;
- 56 of the 266 census divisions lost population;
- 3 of the 56 census divisions losing population, lost more than 10%.

Census divisions losing population tend to be the rural ones with low population density. Of the three losing more than 10%, two were in northern Manitoba and one in northern British Columbia. Those that were high gainers are located in or near large census metropolitan areas, or in the Peace River area of northern Alberta, or in regions associated with energy resource development. The two maps located in the pocket at the centre of the publication show the boundaries of these census divisions with their 1981 population distribution and their percentage change in population in the past five years.





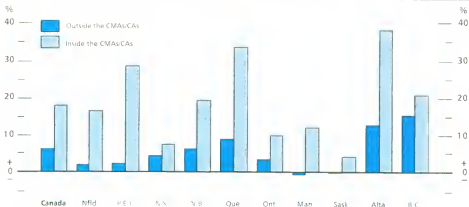
# THE URBAN AND RURAL POPULATION

Data from Canadian censuses show that the proportion of the population living in urban areas rose continually up to 1971. From the 1976 and the 1981 Censuses, we are beginning to see a historic trend shift. The proportion of the population living in rural Canada rose from 23.9% in 1971 to 24.0% in 1976 and to 24.3% in 1981. These changes are very small when compared to the urban/rural changes that took place in the 1950s and 1960s, which begs the question: Is the beginning of an

urban decline taking place, or is it a stabilizing of the urban/rural proportion? And if a reversal is occurring, are all rural areas gaining or is it only those that are close to the major urban areas in Canada?

Chart 5

Percentage Change in Rural Population, Canada and Provinces, 1976-1981



Source: 1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue Nos. 93-901 to 93-912, Tables 2 and 5

The rural population in Canada increased nearly 481,000 in the past five years, and almost half (45%) of this increase occurred within the census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations (see Table 4 for definitions). If this increase had been distributed in the same proportions as the 1976 rural population, an increase of 107,000 would have been expected within these areas. What actually happened was an increase of more than twice this number (217,000), indicating that the attraction towards the rural parts of Canada is happening near the major urban areas.

Table 4

**Change in Rural Population, Canada and Provinces, 1976-1981**

	Population change			Percentage change		
	Total	Outside CMAs(1)/ CAs(2)	Within CMAs(1)/ CAs(2)	Total	Outside CMAs(1)/ CAs(2)	Within CMAs(1)/ CAs(2)
Canada(3)	480,846	264,021	216,825	8.9	6.3	18.0
Newfoundland	8,562	3,737	4,825	3.8	1.9	16.5
Prince Edward Island	6,108	1,201	4,907	8.5	2.2	28.8
Nova Scotia	20,184	11,288	8,896	5.6	4.6	7.6
New Brunswick	28,412	14,875	13,537	9.0	6.1	19.5
Quebec	176,435	94,039	82,396	13.9	9.2	33.8
Ontario	84,919	34,746	50,173	5.7	3.5	10.2
Manitoba	329	-2,795	3,124	0.1	-1.0	12.2
Saskatchewan	-1,549	-2,076	527	-0.4	-0.5	4.4
Alberta	65,628	52,888	12,740	14.8	12.9	38.3
British Columbia	89,694	53,994	35,700	17.4	15.7	20.9

(1) Census metropolitan area - Main labour market area of a continuously built-up area having 100,000 or more population.

(2) Census agglomeration - Main labour market area of a continuously built-up area having between 10,000-99,999 population.

(3) Includes Yukon and Northwest Territories which contain no CMAs or CAs.

Source: 1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue Nos. 93-901 to 93-912, Tables 2 and 5.

# *CHANGING PATTERNS OF DISTRIBUTION BY SELECTED POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS*

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One might suppose that the population distribution of Canada by its provinces would imply the same distribution for the various subgroups of the population. This would be true if each province's population was a microcosm of Canada's population. But this is not the case. Canada has many major population differences from one region to another. Let's look at a few of these subpopulation distributions and their changes since the beginning of the post-war period. Table 5 shows the percentage distribution of the population in Canada by province for the census years 1951, 1961, 1971 and 1981. Table 6 shows the percentage distribution of the population 65 years and over in Canada by province, for the same years.

To compare two distributions, we use a measure called "Index of Dissimilarity" which is zero if the two distributions are identical, and gets larger as the two distributions become more different. We have calculated this index to compare the distributions given in Tables 5 and 6 for each census year and it ranges from 8.8 in 1951 to 5.1 in 1981, meaning that the differences in the distributions or the concentrations of the older population are decreasing when compared with the population in general. The same is true for the young population defined as those 19 years and under. This index decreases from 5.0 in 1951 to 2.2 in 1981, again meaning that the young are not as concentrated provincially now as they were in 1951. For the population born outside of Canada, the index, while high compared to those by age groups, is nevertheless also decreasing in size.

This index tells us there is a very significant concentration of the population born outside of Canada, but that it shows a steady decline and perhaps levelling off in 1981. These indices are pointing out that as Canada's population increases, its provincial concentration by certain characteristics of that population is lessening. But is this always the case? What about that portion of the population who responded "French only" to the census question on official language?

The Index of Dissimilarity for this characteristic reveals one which is much higher than any of the others. Its magnitude increased, as well, for each period from 1951 to 1981, indicating that not only is the concentration of this segment of the population very high, but also that it is increasing in concentration rather than decreasing.

Table 5

**Percentage Distribution by Province of Total Population, Canada, 1951-1981**

	1951	1961	1971	1981
	%	%	%	%
Canada(1)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Newfoundland	2.6	2.5	2.4	2.3
Prince Edward Island	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.5
Nova Scotia	4.6	4.0	3.7	3.5
New Brunswick	3.7	3.3	2.9	2.9
Quebec	28.9	28.8	27.9	26.4
Ontario	32.8	34.2	35.7	35.4
Manitoba	5.5	5.1	4.6	4.2
Saskatchewan	5.9	5.1	4.3	4.0
Alberta	6.7	7.3	7.5	9.2
British Columbia	8.3	8.9	10.1	11.3

(1) Includes Yukon and Northwest Territories.

Source: 1951 and 1961 Censuses of Canada

1971 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-702, Table 1

1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-901, Table 1.

Table 6

**Percentage Distribution by Province of the Population 65 Years and Over, Canada, 1951- 1981**

	1951	1961	1971	1981
	%	%	%	%
Canada(1)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Newfoundland	2.2	1.9	1.8	1.9
Prince Edward Island	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.6
Nova Scotia	5.1	4.6	4.2	3.9
New Brunswick	3.5	3.4	3.1	3.0
Quebec	21.4	22.0	23.7	24.1
Ontario	36.9	36.5	36.9	36.8
Manitoba	6.0	6.0	5.5	5.2
Saskatchewan	6.2	6.2	5.4	4.9
Alberta	6.2	6.7	6.8	6.9
British Columbia	11.6	11.9	11.8	12.6
<b>Index of Dissimilarity(2)</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>5.1</b>

(1) Includes Yukon and Northwest Territories.

(2) The Index of Dissimilarity is calculated by summing the absolute differences between the total population percentages and the "characteristic" percentages and dividing by 2.

Source: 1951 Census of Canada, Vol. 1, Table 21.

1961 Census of Canada, Vol. 1.2, Table 21.

1971 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-715, Table 8.

1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-901, Table 6.

Table 7

## Indices of Dissimilarity of Provincial Distributions of Selected Population Characteristics, Canada, 1951-1981

Population characteristics	Index of Dissimilarity			
	1951	1961	1971	1981
Population 19 years and under	5.0	3.1	2.6	2.2
Population born outside Canada	26.9	23.2	22.1	22.2
Population with "French only" official language	63.4	64.6	66.0	69.5

Source: 1951 Census of Canada, Vol. 1, Tables 21, 46 and 54.

1961 Census of Canada, Vol. 1 2, Tables 21, 50 and 65.

1971 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-715, Tables 8 and 35; Catalogue No. 92-726, Table 26.

1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue No. 92-901, Table 6; Catalogue No. 95-941, Table 1.



# CONCLUSION

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Highlights of Canada's changing population distribution:

- The increase in population during the past decade of 12.9% is the fourth lowest recorded since the first census (1871) taken after Confederation.
- British Columbia is the only region which has shown a continuous increase in its share of the population in Canada since 1901.
- Of all the provinces, Alberta showed the largest increase in its population (21.8%) between 1976 and 1981.
- Twenty of the 210 census divisions that gained population between 1976 and 1981 did so at a rate of 20% or more, and they tended to be in or near the largest metropolitan areas or in northern Alberta and British Columbia.
- Three of the 56 census divisions that lost population between 1976 and 1981 did so at a rate of 10% or more. Two of these were in northern Manitoba, the other in northern British Columbia.
- The rural population in Canada increased by 8.9% or nearly 481,000 between 1976 and 1981, with all provinces except Saskatchewan contributing to this phenomenon.
- The provincial distribution of population by age groups is becoming closer to the total population distribution.
- The provincial distribution of the population born outside of Canada is also becoming closer to the total population distribution, but this population is four times more concentrated provincially (as revealed by the Index of Dissimilarity) than the population 65 years and over.
- The provincial distribution of the population responding "French only" to the question on official language shows a very high concentration provincially, and one which is increasing.

Canada has taken a census of population every ten years from 1851 and every five years from 1956. The last census was taken on June 3, 1981. The census data constitute the most important single source of information on the population of Canada by many geographic areas from the national and provincial levels down to smaller groups such as cities, towns and municipalities. These data include: information on the number of people who live in Canada; their characteristics such as age, sex, marital status, language, educational level and occupation; number and types of families; and types of dwellings. Census information is used for a variety of purposes by private individuals, governments at all levels, educational institutions, business people and other organizations.

As part of a program to supplement 1981 Census statistical reports, a special series of popular studies has been undertaken on selected topics of public interest. Each study is a description of major trends and patterns. The data used are from the 1981 Census and other relevant sources. This series is designed for use at the high school and community college levels. However, it could also be of interest to the general public.

CANADA'S CHANGING POPULATION DISTRIBUTION is one of the reports in this series. It brings together under one cover highlights of information about changes in the geographic distribution of Canada's population. Other studies in the series are being published at about the same time or within the next few months.

The manuscript for this study was prepared in the Social Statistics Field by Henry Puderer and Ross Bradley.

Editing services were provided by Federal and Media Relations Division. Census Operations Division, in cooperation with Production and Support Services Division, coordinated the design, composition and printing.



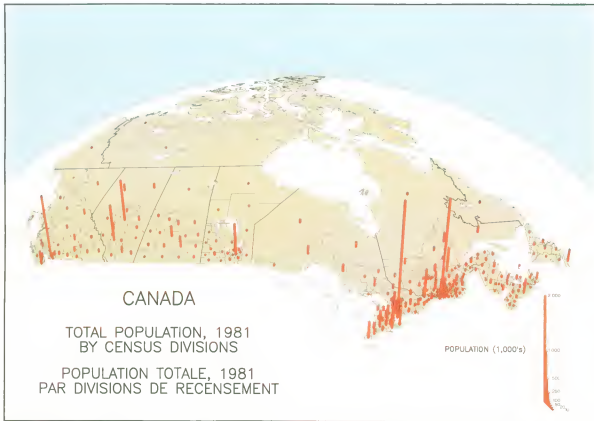
## 1981 CENSUS CONTENT SERIES

Titles of the publications in this series are listed below as well as their catalogue numbers.

Publications	Catalogue numbers
Canada's Changing Population Distribution	99-931
The Elderly in Canada	99-932
Canada's Lone-parent Families	99-933
Living Alone	99-934
Language in Canada	99-935
Canada's Immigrants	99-936
Canada's Native People	99-937
Schooling in Canada	99-938
Canada's Young Family Home-owners	99-939
Women in the Work World	99-940
Changes in Income in Canada: 1970-1980	99-941
Urban Growth in Canada	99-942

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Source: 1981 Census of Canada  
Produced by the Geocartographics Sub-division, Statistics Canada, 1983

Source: Recensement du Canada de 1981  
Préparé par la Sous-division géocartographique, Statistique Canada, 1983



